

Betel chewing in *kāvya* literature and Indian art

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Betel chewing is one of the best-known and widespread customs in South-East Asia. Its popularity and sustainability resulted in the creation of the entire tradition of betel consumption, which includes not only all the rites where it plays an important role, but also the artistic genre which consists of implements and items for storing, preparing, and serving betel ingredients, as well as numerous references in literature. This means that the act of betel chewing can be considered from many different points of view. Most of the publications concerning this custom deal with the medical and health aspects of the consumption of betel. The main goal of the present article is to show the tradition through the analysis of provided examples of stanzas taken from the works of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature and through the way in which the betel motif occurs in Indian art. The article will therefore be divided into three main parts. The first concerns the plant, the main stimulating ingredient, and will offer a brief summarization of the historical aspects of betel chewing. The second part will focus on the occurrence of the betel motif in *kāvya* literature, in order to show in what context it is present in texts and its role therein. Finally, the tradition will be presented from the artistic point of view with special reference to the Applied Arts. Examples of the implements required to prepare a betel quid and used in a chewing session will show the artistic dimension of the phenomenon and pay attention to details in the process of consuming betel.

A brief history of betel chewing

Components of the betel quid differ across Asia. In the most popular, widely prescribed form it consists of the fruit of the *Areca catechu*,¹ the leaf of the *Piper betle* and a small portion of lime. The first ingredient which is the fruit (small, ca. five centimeters long, usually round or oval) is commonly, yet incorrectly called

1. *Areca catechu* is commonly called betel palm, however, the term is incorrect since this name is reserved for *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens* (Zumbroich 2008, 91).

a nut, probably due to its thick fibrous pericarp (the so-called husk) which encloses the seed.² The ripeness of the fruit at the moment of harvesting and the way in which it is added to the quid depends on local preferences. It can be dried, boiled to fermentation or simply used raw. In the areas where the areca palm is not cultivated it can be replaced by other wild growing palm species such as *Pinanga dicsonii*, *Areca triandra* or *Areca macrocalyx*.³ The second and very important component of the quid is the heart-shaped leaf of the *Piper betle* (sometimes substituted by leaves from other *Piper* species). Lime, the third ingredient of the quid, is ground to a powder and with the addition of water (to create a paste-like consistency) smeared onto a leaf. Quicklime is usually obtained by heating the shells of mollusks or coral to a high temperature. Such a combination of components creates a basic quid to which further ingredients can be added.

The properties of plants constituting a quid are precisely described in the works concerning the *āyurveda* medical system. The *Carakasamhitā* (ca. 1st century CE)⁴ in the part concerning *mātrāsītīya* (the recommended daily regimens for well-being and hygiene) enumerates fragrant refreshing substances to keep in one's mouth:

One desiring clarity, taste and good smell should keep in his mouth the fruit of nutmeg, musk seed, areca nut,⁵ cubeb, small-cardamom and clove, fresh betel leaf⁶ and exudate of camphor.⁷

Betel chewing was considered to be not only refreshing, but was also used to treat afflictions of the oral cavity, thereby playing an important role in oral hygiene. This property has also been later underlined by the *Suśrutasamhitā*:

Chewing betel leaves with powder of camphor, nutmeg, cubebs, clove, musk seed, lime and areca nut (...) mitigates excess salivation, is good for the heart, and cures diseases of the throat; it is beneficial soon after getting up from sleep, partaking meals, bathing and vomiting.⁸

Betel has been described in Indian medical literature as a therapeutic agent having de-worming properties, recommended for such diseases as leprosy, anemia or obesity.⁹ Among its other medicinal values, betel is listed as being useful for constipation,

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 118.

5. Skt. *pūga*.

6. Skt. *tāmbūla*.

7. *Carakasamhitā*, *Sūtrasthāna* 5.76cd-77, transl. P.V. Sharma (Zumbroich 2008, 118).

8. *Suśrutasamhitā*, *Cikitsāsthāna* 24.21-23, transl. K.R.S. Murthy (Zumbroich 2008, 119).

9. Velayudhan *et alii* no year, 2.

headaches or for treating hysteria.¹⁰ The plant is also believed to have antibacterial and antifungal properties.

Although the earliest European reference to betel was made by Marco Polo¹¹ in the 13th century¹² the custom is much older. The habit of chewing betel is spread throughout South-East Asia; from the whole Indian subcontinent and the southern part of China in the North to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea in the South; from Madagascar in the West to Micronesia and Melanesia in the East.¹³ In these areas all the components necessary to prepare a quid are easily obtainable. But the custom also reached the other territories to which betel-chew ingredients were exported, namely the Arabian Peninsula, Mecca and the Hejaz, Tibet and even Southern Europe – Portugal, Italy, etc.¹⁴ The sources of information concerning the beginnings of betel chewing are archaeological, archaeobotanical, and linguistic data. From the archaeological point of view, a very important role is played by dental remains, which are indicators of human diet and lifestyle. However, the so-called ‘betel stains’ can be confused with ‘teeth blackening’, the deliberate practice of colouring teeth for aesthetic reasons or ritual purposes.¹⁵ Archaeobotanical data indicate that the areca palm and betel vine were relocated by humans to South India from the islands of South-East Asia to which they natively belong. According to Thomas Zumbroich, this could have happened ‘as early as the middle of the second millennium BCE’.¹⁶ The third and very important source of knowledge concerning the beginning of the betel chewing custom is linguistic data, especially in the case of the Indian subcontinent, where no archaeological evidence has been found. In summary, this kind of analysis confirms the data obtained from archaeological and archaeobotanical sources claiming that neither the areca palm, nor the betel vine were native to southern India.¹⁷

Since betel chewing was a widely spread custom, it was also commonly mentioned in literature which is the reflection of human lifestyle, habits, and views. By tracing references to betel in Indian literature, many aspects of the tradition of its consumption can be reconstructed. In fact, it is not just the common occurrence of the betel motif that provides evidence of how important this element was in social life. A similar role is played by the frequent mention in

10. Guha 2006, 90.

11. In a later period European travellers such as *inter alia* Ludovico di Varthema, Duarte Barbosa or Niccolao Manucci paid attention to the custom of betel chewing. Penzer (1927, 255-70) gives a useful overview of their travel reports.

12. Rooney 1994, 6.

13. *Ibid.*, 2.

14. Stanyukovich 2014, 4.

15. Zumbroich 2008, 98-99.

16. Zumbroich 2012, 84.

17. For more information on the linguistic analysis of words related to betel chewing see Penzer 1927, 238-39 and Zumbroich 2008, 114-15.

the literature of the existence of castes connected with betel – *barāi* (*baraiyā*, *bāru*), namely, the plant growers, and the *tamboli* (*tamoli*, *tamdī*), the leaf sellers. Equally important is the fact that betel gardens were ‘of great cultural significance, treated almost like a sacred spot’.¹⁸ The availability of ingredients and the simple preparation of the quid makes the custom popular amongst all the social strata, including the lowest ones. Nevertheless, betel chewing in ancient India was part of an urban culture formed in the 5th–4th centuries BCE.¹⁹ Moreover, in Indian literature it is often related to court life, such as in one of the *jātaka* tales which mentions it as part of a king’s post-prandial toilet or in *Cilappatikāram*, the Tamil Epic, where a king gave a present of a golden betel case to his favourite courtesan. This kind of gift was a token of acceptance. Although betel chewing was popular not only amongst the nobles, it was also a sign of social status, for example, as shown by the existence of the role of betel set valet or the value of items used in the preparation for the chew.

The great source of knowledge of customs connected with betel chewing is also Vātsyāyana’s *Kāmasūtra*. It is introduced in the treatise not only as an important element of daily regimens for hygiene (KS 1.4.5), as an essential part of hospitality for a householder’s friends offered by his wife (KS 4.1.36) or as a gift or tip for servants (KS 2.10.5), but it was also a significant component of the art of love. It was recommended that betel should be kept next to one’s bed along with other aromatics (KS 1.4.4) and used to gain a girl’s trust, building her confidence by transferring it directly to her mouth (KS 3.2.11–12). The *Kāmasūtra* also suggests chewing betel together with a partner after intercourse (KS 2.10.6). It was believed to stimulate pleasure, love, and passion and through the usage of particular additions, it was also considered to be an aphrodisiac. Optional substances added to a chew are commonly known as *pañcasugandhaka*. Monier-Williams’ dictionary suggests translating the term as ‘a collection of 5 kinds of aromatic vegetable substances (viz. cloves, nutmeg, camphor, aloe wood, and *kakkola*)’,²⁰ but the number and names of substances (including spices and aromatics) differ in various texts. Norman M. Penzer recalls the medical dictionary titled *Vaidyakaśabdāsindhu* according to which these are *karpūra* (camphor), *kañkāla* (probably *Piper chaba*), *lavaṅga* (cloves), *jātiphala* (nutmeg) and *pūga* (areca fruit).²¹ Some of these substances were also mentioned in one of *Brhatsaṃhitā*’s (6th century CE) *adhyāyas*. In the chapter concerning the preparation of perfumes we read that:

At night it is beneficial to have an overdose of betel-leaf, while by day of areca-nut. To change this order is a mere farce of betel-chewing. When betel-leaf is

18. Penzer 1927, 270–71.

19. Stanyukovich 2014, 4.

20. Monier-Williams 2005, 577.

21. Penzer 1927, 246.

made fragrant by Kakkola, areca-nut, clove and Jatee it makes one happy with the joy of amorous intoxication.²²

In Varāhamihira's work, betel chewing was placed in the wider framework of the art of love – the author suggests that consumption of betel with the addition of particular substances incites amorous ardour. The inclusion of betel in the art of love was not accidental. As Thomas Zumbroich suggests:

Besides the sexual overtones of orality during consumption of betel, its visual symbolism was coded in shape (betel leaf as yoni, areca nut as lingam), spatial arrangement (areca nut [seed/fruit] resting in the leaf [vulva, placental]) and colour (lime as semen, red saliva as female sexual discharge/menstrual blood) and growth habits of the source plants (betel pepper vine entwining/embracing the palm trunk [...])²³

Betel chewing was therefore an important aspect in fostering social and sexual relationships. Its symbolism was probably the source of its incorporation in rites concerning puberty or pregnancy.²⁴ Since the two halves of the betel seed are a perfect match, symbolizing a couple and a lovers' go-between, it is also an important part of wedding ceremonies in many communities.²⁵

Images of betel in kāvya literature

In light of the fact that the betel chewing custom was so popular across India and played an important role in many ceremonies and rites, it is not surprising that it also became a popular motif in literature, commonly occurring especially in love poems. On account of its rich symbolism, it is a significant tool, desirable in the poetical creation of a *śṛṅgārārāsa* – pervading atmosphere, a mood of love and passion. Additionally, the function of images of tastes and odours was to affect the senses and supplement the poetry's appeal, such as in the example taken from the *Rtusamhāra* attributed to Kālidāsa:²⁶

gr̥hitāmbūlavilepanasrajaḥ puṣpāsavāmoditavaktrapaṅkajāḥ /
prakāmakālāgurudhūpavāsitaṃ viśanti śayyāgr̥haṃ utsukāḥ striyaḥ / /
(RS 5.5)

22. *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 77.37, transl. Sastri–Bhat 1947, 613.

23. Zumbroich 2012, 74.

24. Penzer 1927, 42–44.

25. Interesting references to the betel chewing custom can be found in the seven volumes of Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. For a detailed overview see Penzer 1927, 275–83.

26. The six cantos poem describing the changing seasons (six seasons – one per each canto) in relation to lovers' feelings.

Taking (with them) betel-rolls, cosmetics and garlands, their lotus-like faces redolent of floral liquor, women full of longing enter the bed-chamber (which is) thoroughly perfumed with the incense of *kālāguru*.²⁷

The quoted passage is taken from the fifth canto describing *śīsīra*, the winter season, when it is cold outside and warm bedrooms beckon people to make love. In this fragment, all the fragrances and tastes underline women's efforts to create perfect surroundings for an amorous meeting. The substances they brought to the chamber resemble those recommended in the *Kāmasūtra* to be kept next to the bed.

But betel does not only occur in the descriptions of love play. It may also emphasize an unfulfilled feeling, being rejected, just as in Bhaṭṭi's *Rāvaṇavadha* (7th century CE):²⁸

ābadhanetrāñjanapaṅkaleśas tāmṇūlarāgaṃ bahulaṃ dadhānaḥ /
caḥkāra kānto 'py adharo 'ṅganānāṃ sahoṣitānāṃ patibhir laghutvam / /
(BhK 11.23)

Bearing the ample redness of the betel roll, the attractive lower lip to which a bit of wet collyrium from the eyes had got stuck brought lowliness to the ladies who had stayed in the company of their husbands.²⁹

The woman's lips smeared with reddish betel symbolize rejection because it means that she has not been kissed. Otherwise, the dye would have been removed by passionate kisses. The girl's misery is also emphasized through the mention of eye-pigment on her lip – a sign that she has been crying. All these factors create an image of a weeping, disillusioned, and insulted woman whose careful preparations for the amorous meeting had been ignored. They also underline her misery at the moment of being rejected. Nevertheless, as in the previous example, she used betel during her preparation for the night.

Tāmṇūlarāga, the betel redness mentioned in the above stanza, similarly to the *bimba* or *bandhūka* flower, often occurs in the poetical descriptions of faces, where it refers to the colour of women's lips. This relation was emphasized by the author of *Bhaṭṭikāvya* in one more passage:

dantacchede prajvalitāgnikalpe tāmṇūlarāgas tṛṇabhāratulyaḥ /
nyastaḥ kim ity ūcur upetabhāvā goṣṭhiṣu naris taruṇir yuvānaḥ / /
(BhK 11.33)

27. Transl. Kale 1967, 50.

28. *Rāvaṇavadha* is also known as *Bhaṭṭikāvya*. It is one of the *mahākāvyas*. *Mahākāvya* (lit. great poem) is a genre in classical Sanskrit literature characterised *inter alia* by ornate and elaborate descriptions of scenery, love and battles.

29. Transl. M. A. Karandikar and S. Karandikar (Sudyka 2004, 155).

‘Why put the redness of betel on the lips like a load of grass into a blazing fire?’.

The young men roused to passion asked the slender girls in conversations.

Colouring lips with betel juice is described here as an useless action which is merely used to sustain an already existing feature. It is the emphasis on the redness of a woman’s lips which is an extremely important element in the poetical convention concerning the depiction of female beauty.

Betel has already been mentioned as the meaningful factor that plays a significant role in the preparation for the amorous interaction, but it also occurs in the descriptions of the venue which has already been witness to love play, as in one of the stanzas in the *Amaruśataka*.³⁰

*aṅgaṃ candanapāṇḍupallavamṛdustāmbūlatāmrādharo dhārāyantrajalābhi-
śekakaluṣe dhautāñjane locane /
antaḥpuṣpasugandhirādrakavarī sarvāṅgalagnāmbaram romāṇām ramaṇī-
yatām vidadhati grīṣmāparāhvāgame //*
(AŚ 65)

Scarlet betel-nut juice spattered around, black streaks of sandalwood oil, smears of camphor, and imprints from the henna designs on her feet. In scattered folds petals lost from her hair. Every position a woman took pleasure from is told on these bed sheets.³¹

Once again, betel juice stains indicate that it had been used by a woman before intercourse, along with other fragrant substances designed to prepare her body for the meeting. All of these elements, including the marks left by the lovers on the sheets become a mute testimony to past events. Such a description is a tool to underline the sensual nature of the scene, filling it with a passionate mood.

As in the above examples, betel is often mentioned in poetry together with other aromatics in the descriptions of *sambhoga-śṛṅgāra* – love-in-enjoyment. However, the memories of the moments spent together are also recalled by poets while depicting *vipralambha-śṛṅgāra* – love-in-separation. All the substances become a medium that brings the image of a lover to mind, inciting a poetical vision, as in one of the stanzas of the *Caurapañcāśikā*.³²

*adyāpi tām nidhuvane madhudigdhamugdhaliḍhādhārām kṛṣatanuṃ ca-
palāyataḥśm /*

30. As is well-known, the *Amaruśataka* is a collection of love stanzas ascribed to Amaru or Amaruka, probably compiled ca. 8th century CE (Schelling 2004, ix).

31. AŚ 65, transl. Schelling 2004, 65.

32. The *Caurapañcāśikā*, also known as *Caurasuratapañcāśikā*, *Cauraśataka* or *Bilhaṇaśataka* is attributed to Bilhaṇa (ca. 11th century CE). The above stanza occurs in the northern recension of the text, while it is not present in the western-southern one.

*kāśmīrapaṇkamṛganābhikṛtāṅgarāgām karpūrapūgaparipūrṇamukhīm sma-
rāmi ||*
(CP 9)

Even now, I remember the wine-smeared lips she innocently licked in love, her weak form, her wanton long eyes, her body rubbed golden with saffron paste and musk, her mouth savourous with camphor and betel nut.³³

In this ‘elegant catalog of remembered moments of love’, as Barbara Stoler Miller calls the *Caurapañcāsikā*,³⁴ the poet creates a vision filled with fragrances and tastes. The substances recalled bring to mind the recommendations in *kāmasāstric* literature which help to create the *śṛṅgāra* mood of the poem and the memory of the moments of intensified emotions.

Betel art

The betel chewing custom was also reflected in visual art. The commonly occurring motif in painting is the *tāmbūla sevā* – offering betel, as in the case of the anonymous work depicting Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in which Kṛṣṇa offers betel to his beloved and envelops her in a gentle embrace.³⁵ A simple leaf emphasizes the *śṛṅgāra* mood of the composition. It plays the same role in a painting of ca. 1890 portraying the scandalous Tarakeswar Affair (also known as the Mahant-Elokeshi affair) of 1873, which concerned the forbidden relationship between a brahmin head priest and Elokeshi, the young wife of the Bengali government employee Nobin Chandra Banerjee.³⁶ The work is an example of a Kalighat painting³⁷ where such images were created by painters who began to migrate to Calcutta from rural Bengal in around 1830.

Moreover, the popularity of the custom amongst nobles has also been portrayed in painting. Many works present kings and princes chewing betel. A *Vibhāsa Rāga* painting (late 17th century, Rajasthan) in the collection of the London’s Victoria and Albert Museum³⁸ depicts a prince and lady with an at-

33. Text and transl. Stoler Miller 1971, 18-19.

34. *Ibid.*, 8.

35. This painting is from Kishangarh, Rajasthan, and probably belongs to the middle of the 18th century. It is currently found in the South Asian Art Department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (Accession Number 1984-72-1).

36. This work, by an unknown artist from Calcutta, is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Museum Number IM. 137-1914).

37. A type that derives its name from the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta. The Kalighat paintings developed from the depiction of Hindu gods, goddesses, and other mythological characters, to reflect a variety of themes, sometimes of a political nature, as for example the above mentioned Tarakeswar Affair.

38. Museum Number IS.44-953.

tendant. The woman is offering him a betel leaf. As the title suggests it is an illustration of the musical mode of a very diverse *rāga* heard in the early morning hours. Since chewing betel was an element of one's daily toilet, it may also refer to the previously mentioned morning regimens for hygiene described in the *Kāmasūtra*.

Another work, *A Prince of Jaipur Playing Chess* (ca. 1780–1800, Jaipur, Rajasthan)³⁹ by an anonymous artist shows the man smoking a huqqa as he reclines on a low couch. One of the servants portrayed in the drawing is holding a piece of betel.

However, the betel does not only occur in art in the form of a painting theme. It is also used as a pigment. Betel fruit juice gives a red colour not only to lips but also to the paint used in the creative process. In the *Lakshmi and Saraswati* (1995–1998, Naya, West Bengal) painting by the contemporary artist Ranjit Chitrakar,⁴⁰ it gives a beautiful scarlet colour to the goddess's dress.

Another dimension of betel occurrence in art is the artistic nature of the implements required to prepare a betel quid and used in a chewing session. The basic items are the areca fruit cutter and the pestle and mortar to grind it for the toothless. Then there is the lime container with a spatula or small spoon for its application, the box for storing the areca fruits, the betel bag, and the spitting bowls and various trays for storing the leaves and serving the chew. Since betel chewing was enjoyed by the royals, richly ornamented implements became indicators of social status. Everyone could chew betel but not everyone could afford to use special tools made of certain materials. In rich households, betel sets were not only everyday objects but also home decorations. Embroidered bags for carrying the leaves were usually oval or square with a central design. Servants who were assigned to the job attached the bag to their waist-belt or carried it over their shoulder. Bags vary in size from large to small, just as betel boxes come in many shapes and sizes. These boxes were designed for holding areca fruits and additional substances and were usually made of brass or copper (Fig. 1) even though silver or wooden items can also be found. Animal shaped betel boxes were very popular (Fig. 2) and animals were also one of the favourite motifs for areca fruit cutters. The latter were often carved in the shape of birds or erotic figures (Fig. 3), which could be helpful in creating an amorous mood during the preparations for spending the night together with a partner and decorating the venue – the lovers' chamber. Sometimes they were inlaid with coloured glass or precious stones, with ornate handles made of ivory, bone or pearl. Another extremely important element needed to prepare a quid is the

39. This work is in the collection of the South Asian Art Department, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (Accession Number 2006-53-113).

40. Ranjit Chitrakar is one of the Naya artists. This West Bengal village, often called the 'village of painters', is home to over three hundred working artists' families. The painting is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Museum Number IS.42-2011).

lime container whose shape resembles a watch-case (Fig. 4). It was usually made of brass or copper and has a chain to which a spatula or a small spoon was attached. It served for the application of lime to a leaf. Craftsmen often created whole betel sets in which the adornment of each individual element was thematically consistent.

If one considers all the presented examples, it is fair to say that the *tāmbūla* motif commonly occurred in Indian art and literature. Betel chewing was a link between almost every kind of relationship: between a host and a guest, a king and his subjects, a man and a woman. It was not only an element of sexual etiquette or popular enjoyment but also an item used in the worship of gods. *Tāmbūla* leaves and areca fruits were offered to a deity while chanting a *mantra*. Nowadays, betel chewing evokes those particularly nauseating red stains that cover walls and streets. It is no longer associated with kings and nobles but with the lowest strata of society. Beauty ideals are changing and young people educated in the West no longer maintain the custom (or at least they do not follow it to such a degree as before). The occurrence of betel during rites and ceremonies still plays an important role, but the custom itself is no longer so popular. One of the reasons is also due to the increasing awareness of the influence it has on health. Despite the many positive sides of betel chewing mentioned *inter alia* in Indian medical literature, it is also often reported as causing mouth cancer. All of the associations with royal life, high status, and the art of love have been replaced by images of dirt and disease. Luckily, the bright side of the custom is still alive through the numerous references in art and literature which remind us of its glorious aroma-filled past.

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Fig. 1. Betel box, copper and brass, 18th century, from Gujarat, Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune, India (photo T. Szurlej).



Fig. 2. Betel box, brass, 18th–19th century, from Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune, India (photo T. Szurlej).



Fig. 3. Areca fruit cutters, brass, 18th–19th century, from Gujarat and Maharashtra, Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune, India (photo T. Szurlej).



Fig. 4. Lime boxes, brass and copper, 18th–19th century, from Maharashtra, Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune, India (photo T. Szurlej).